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ABSTRACT

A study in the Kayenta Unified School District (Arizona) on the Navajo Nation--the largest reservation in the United States--examined cultural and language barriers in teaching Navajo special education students. Questionnaires were returned from 26 teachers at all grade levels, and interviews were conducted with 5 teachers and the district curriculum director. Results indicate that teachers' perceptions about teaching students with disabilities did not vary appreciably for Navajo versus non-Navajo students. Aside from a Navajo oral language test, standardized assessments specifically geared to Navajo students were not available. Two of the greatest challenges that affected educators on the Navajo Reservation were the isolated environment and the language barrier. Many misunderstandings arise from the different communication patterns of Navajos and Anglos, and many taboos and beliefs can interfere with conventional teaching methods. Most respondents felt that the school district could do more to introduce incoming teachers to Navajo cultural beliefs and taboos. The Navajo people's desire to maintain the values of their traditional culture is basically incompatible with those attributes necessary to excel in Anglo society, such as competitiveness, assertiveness, impatience, and restlessness--qualities that the Navajo people have generally rejected as unworthy. Results include recommendations for non-Navajo teachers' approaches related to culture and language. (TD)

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WORKING WITH NAVAJO SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS ON THE RESERVATION: CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

Kayenta is located on the Navajo Nation, which covers 24,000 square miles and is equivalent to the size of the state of West Virginia. Parts of the Navajo Nation are located in three states: Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The Navajo Nation is the largest reservation in the United States. However, only approximately 160,000 live in this extremely rural area. Kayenta is one of the largest communities on the reservation and is where Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD) is located. The population of Kayenta is approximately 5,000. It is not uncommon for some students attending KUSD to travel on the bus two hours, one-way.

The district's student enrollment for the 1998-99 year was 2,740. Home language surveys indicated that Navajo is a primary language spoken in approximately 92% of the students' homes, although few of the students are considered truly fluent in the Navajo language. Indeed, a great number of students do not enter school fluent in either English or Navajo. The elementary and intermediate schools have one transitional bilingual classroom for each grade level, kindergarten through fifth, with approximately 18-25 students in each classroom. Twelve teachers in the district hold bilingual Navajo certifications. After fifth grade, funding comes from the English as a Second Language (ESL) program for which approximately 63% of the students are eligible. There are no pullout programs for ESL services. It is assumed that every child will be in an ESL certified teacher's classroom. Therefore, all elementary teachers grades K-6, and all reading and language arts teachers grades 7-12, are required to begin work on a 21 hour ESL certification within the first year they are hired.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to inform interested individuals of the challenges and learning opportunities encountered when working with students from culturally different backgrounds, specifically Navajo students.

Many Anglo teachers who are not familiar with life on the Navajo reservation find that their students' lack of English language skills is not the only barrier to communication. A dissimilar worldview, with different cultural expectations and taboos, also plays a major role in miscommunication (Kee, 1989; Scollan & Scollan, 1981).

Scollan & Scollan (1981) discuss four areas of misunderstanding typically found in interactions between English speakers and speakers socialized to communication patterns having their roots in the Athabaskan languages (of which Navajo is one).

1. Presentation of Self: In general, from the English speaker's point of view, conversation is the main way to get to know someone. They will seek conversation with someone whom they wish to know better. But Athabaskan speakers will feel that they do not want to talk with someone unless they know the person quite well, and will remain silent with strangers.

   English speakers are generally expected to present their best qualities (without bragging) "in job interviews, in school, in meeting strangers, or in getting arrested for speeding." In "the Athabaskan system...it is considered inappropriate and bad luck to anticipate good luck, to display oneself in a good light, to predict the future, or to speak badly of another's luck." (Scollan & Scollan, 1981, pp. 19-20).

   Another area of discrepancy concerns eye contact. Navajo children have been taught that looking someone directly in the eye is a sign of disrespect, whereas Anglo people see lack of eye contact as an avoidance tactic, or as indicative that the person is being dishonest or has something to hide.

2. Distribution of Talk: Scollan and Scollan (1981) state that when an Athabaskan speaker and English speaker meet, it is more likely that the English speaker will speak first. They state that studies have found that "the person who speaks first also controls the topic of conversation." Therefore, unless the two know each other very well, "the topic of conversation is almost always the English speaker's topic, not the Athabaskan's." Furthermore, the timing of the conversation will most likely be off. An English speaker will usually pause for around one second or less after a statement to let the other person respond. If the person does not, the English speaker will feel that it is okay to resume speaking. Because the Athabaskan speaker will wait around one and one-half seconds, he will most likely miss the pause which he feels allows him to speak without interrupting. Unfortunately, by then the English speaker has already gone on, with the result that the Athabaskan speaker feels that he is never allowed to speak (Scollan & Scollan, 1981, p.25).

3. Information Structure: Scollan and Scollan (1981) state the following:

   > As an example of information structure, if I say, "I saw a moose standing there," it means one thing. If I say "I saw a *moose* standing there," and stressed the word "moose," it means something else. When I stress "moose" by saying it a little louder and higher in pitch, the sentence means that I saw a moose but I expected to see something else, or nothing at all.

   Athabaskan speakers and English speakers often misunderstand each other's meaning because of the use of different intonation, stress, and "other non-grammatical elements of the message" (Scollan & Scollan, 1981, p.29).

4. Content Organization: Scollan and Scollan (1981) relate that in their work at Fort Chipewyan they found that Athabaskan stories are carefully and formally organized in units of four: two main episodes plus an initial and final section. However, European folktales have traditionally been organized in units of three and English speakers will organize and remember stories in units of three. They maintain that this implies "a very basic difference in themes of conceptual organization" (Scollan & Scollan, 1981, p.35).

Method

The data presented in this manuscript were collected by members of the Reaching American Indian Special Educators (RAISE) program in Kayenta, Arizona under the supervision of their instructors from Northern Arizona University, Center for Excellence in Education.

Thirty-five open-ended questionnaires were distributed to teachers at the primary, intermediate, middle, and high schools. Twenty-six questionnaires were returned actually completed. In addition, we conducted five personal interviews with two teachers each from the primary and the middle schools, and one from the

intermediate school. Also an informal interview was conducted with the district's curriculum director. The table below delineates the gender, ethnicity, total years experience, and certifications held by the respondents, and the types of student disabilities with which they have experience. All of the schools of KUSD participate in full inclusion of students with disabilities.

Survey Questions

1. What have you found to be your greatest challenges teaching on the Navajo Reservation?
2. Do you perceive many differences between teaching students with disabilities in Kayenta, and teaching non-Navajo students with disabilities?
3. Are there cultural differences that have required you to modify your approaches to teaching?
4. Do you feel that the district administration provided you with enough information when you first arrived in regard to cultural beliefs, taboos, and so forth?
5. What kind of communication challenges have you encountered? Do you feel that problems encountered are due to language difficulties or to differences in cultural outlook? Explain.
6. Are you aware of any assessment adaptations that are made for the students in terms of language and/or cultural appropriateness? If so, what are they?

Table I:
Gender, Ethnicity, Years of Experience, and Certification held by Kayenta Unified School District Teachers.

School	Questionnaire	Interviews	Gender		Ethnicity	
Primary	5	2	Male	0	Anglo	4
			Female	7	Navajo	3
Intermediate	7	1	Male	2	Anglo	3
			Female	6	Navajo	5
Middle	9	2	Male	3	Anglo	7
			Female	8	Navajo	4
High School	5	0	Male	1	Anglo	4
			Female	4	Navajo	1

School	Total Years of Teaching	Years Teaching on Reservation	Certification	Types of Disability
Primary	5 - 30	5 ½ - 21	Early Childhood, Elem. Ed., Sp.Ed., Early Intervention, ESL Endorsement, Reading, Counseling, Guidance, Adult Ed., BA, MA in Multicultural-Bilingual Ed.	MMR, LD, VI, HI, Speech, Physical Disability, FAS/FAE, ED/BD, Spinal Bifida, Autism, Deaf & Blind
Intermediate	6 ½ - 22	6 ½ - 22	BA-Speech Pathology, Elem. Ed, Multicultural, Sp. Ed., MA-Ed. Leadership, MA-Sp. ED., BA	Orthopedic, MMR, MR, LD, ED, HI, VI, Speech, Physical Disability

Middle	First - 32	First – 18	Elem. Ed., ESL endorsement, Secondary, Sp. Ed., Bilingual Endorsement, Administration, Reading, MA-Education, MA-Gifted, BA/BS-Med., BA, Post Secondary	LD, VI, HI, Deaf and Blind, FAS/ FAE, ED, LD, MR, ADHD, Cerebral Palsy, All Types
High School	6 mo.– 27	6 mo.- 20	Secondary-(Science, Agricultural Ed.), Sp. Ed., Counseling, Elem. Ed., Post Secondary	LD, VI, HI, MR, ADHD, TBI, Deaf/ Blind

Results

The response to question number one (What have you found to be your greatest challenges teaching on the reservation?) indicated that many teachers felt that the language barriers, isolation of the district, lack of resources, and the lack of parental reinforcement constituted major challenges. One teacher stated that students' and parents' lack of language background affects everything. "My students don't know the meaning of 75% of the words in their spelling book, so how can I expect them to spell them correctly?" Other comments included, "What's taught in school is not reinforced at home." " A great number of the students aren't encouraged to read at home. Many parents don't see reading or doing homework as being of value."

The responses of special educators specifically indicated problems resulting from the high turnover rate of medical staff at the Indian Health Services Hospital (IHS) and the lack of interaction between various government agencies such as IHS, Behavioral Health Services, Social Services, and the court system. One special educator referred to the "overwhelming amount of paperwork continually increasing every year—and so many students with a wide range of differing needs."

In response to question number two (Do you perceive many differences between teaching students with disabilities in Kayenta, and teaching non-Navajo students with disabilities?), the majority of teachers saw few differences. One teacher responded, "It helps to be bilingual...more so in special ed., than in regular ed." Another said, "The number of children entering school with no strong language base is increasing?" Another responded, "The only difference I see is the degree of leaned helplessness. It seems like non-Navajos tend to indulge their children more and the children in turn ask, "What do I get if I do that?"

Question number three asked if there were cultural differences that required modification of teachers' approaches. Many of the teachers said that they made no modifications, possibly because they were Navajo themselves and therefore understood exactly what was needed. Several teachers mentioned sensitive areas in the science and social studies curriculum. In the high school science curriculum, the dissection of animals is a taboo. One parent approached a sixth grade teacher saying that she did not want her child learning about reptiles. There are stories that are appropriate only at certain times of the year. "Some students are uncomfortable talking about owls and snakes." Care must be taken with field trips; some parents will not allow their children to visit ruins due to the possibility of being around burial sites or bones.

One teacher said she did the most modifications in social studies because "the social studies book, like every other social studies textbook, does not view Native Americans favorably. So we skip some things, we modify some things. We preface things with, "You may not feel comfortable with this, but it's mandated by the state and you will need to know it to pass."

Several teachers mentioned that Navajo children learn best by watching; teachers need to give examples and thoroughly demonstrate what they are teaching. Group cooperative learning activities are encouraged. One Navajo teacher mentioned the need to be sensitive to eye contact and to be aware of "body-space" when talking. The spatial distance between two persons talking will depend on whether they are men or women, relatives or non-relatives. "There needs to be a certain space when speaking to Navajos." She also recommended giving verbal "reinforcement" in private rather than in public.

Only two or three of the teachers said that the district administration had provided them with information regarding Navajo beliefs or taboos. One of the Navajo teachers said that she has observed veteran (Anglo) teachers still behaving like new teachers in talking about and/or using taboo materials.

The district Curriculum Director stated that in previous years there were more in-services given for new teachers, but because of staff turnover, there is almost no information given to new teachers now. She maintains that in many cases, teachers are so overwhelmed by the sheer workload, that the last thing they want to do is take time for another workshop. In the case of new teachers, the information overload factor causes many to put the materials aside, with a distinct possibility of never looking at them again.

Question number five (What kind of communication challenges have you encountered? Do you feel that problems encountered are due to language difficulties or to differences in cultural outlook?) revealed that for the majority of Anglo teachers, the language barrier simply exacerbated the miscommunication due to different cultural expectations. "There are minor syntactic issues, but the main obstacles I see are semantic incongruities derived from cultural differences," said one interviewee. A Navajo teacher stated that she was easily able to address language/cultural problems but "for the non-Navajo teacher, teaching becomes very difficult. Usually, the child withdraws, acts out, or refuses to learn when the teacher does not make accommodations for the child." Some Navajo teachers also occasionally have difficulty communicating with students because of the students' dialect and lack of English vocabulary. Also mentioned was the need to slow down and allow more processing time for questions and answers.

In response to the final question regarding adaptations to assessments, the majority of teachers said that they knew of none. One Navajo teacher indicated that with the exception of the Window Rock Oral language Test, she knew of no standardized assessment for Navajo students. "A lot has been standardized on (the) Hispanic population and Black population, but not that many on the Navajo population." The Window Rock Oral Language test was developed to assess Navajo language proficiency in the elementary grades, and a modification of it is used in the upper grades. In kindergarten through fifth grade, all teachers have aides who are able to explain concepts in Navajo if necessary. There are no aides available from sixth grade through twelfth.

According to the KUSD Curriculum Director, because of the types of program funding the district receives; the state strictly mandates the types of assessments the district is allowed to use. Assessments may be waived for the first three years of schooling, but after that time, formal standardized assessments are required.

Conclusion

Teachers' perceptions about teaching students with disabilities do not vary appreciably depending on whether the student is Navajo or non-Navajo. There are still many barriers to overcome. Aside from a Navajo oral language test, standardized assessments specifically geared to Navajo students are not available. Two of the greatest challenges that affect educators on the Navajo Reservation are the isolated environment and the language barrier. However, the overriding difficulty, in the words of one of our teacher interviewees is, "dealing with the frustration of cultural mores versus world reality." Most of the students graduating from high school will be forced to leave the reservation either to find a job or to pursue higher education. Kayenta Unified School District is committed to pursuing the goal of culturally compatible schools, while simultaneously teaching students the skills they will need to deal with life off of the reservation in Anglo society (KUSD, 1998). There exists a basic

incompatibility, however, between the Navajo peoples' desire to maintain the values of their traditional culture, and acceptance of those attributes perceived necessary to excel in Anglo society, such as competitiveness, assertiveness, impatience, and restlessness—qualities which the Navajo people have generally rejected as unworthy.

As we have seen in this study, many misunderstandings arise from very different communication patterns. It would behoove us to overcome our ethnocentricity. In the Navajo culture there are many unspoken taboos and beliefs which could possibly interfere with traditional teaching methods and curriculum. The perception of most of the respondents is that KUSD could do more to introduce incoming teachers to the Navajo cultural beliefs and taboos. Checking with Navajo school employees to determine if classroom activities are culturally appropriate is suggested.

Based on the writers' experience, we think teaching the Navajo can be an extremely rewarding experience. Other suggestions for the non-Navajo teacher include becoming aware of the culture and lifestyle, be observant, open minded and good listeners, be flexible and be willing to learn and incorporate different values in the classroom.

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